



Literature Review and Exploratory Fieldwork

Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation (MELI)

Equity in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Programs

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ACRONYM LIST

AAPISI: Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions

AET: Agency Equity Team

ASL: American Sign Language

CC: Community College

COIL: Collaborative Online International Learning

DEIA: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (some non-partner institutions referred to the A as anti-racism)

DOS: Department of State

ECA: Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

EO: Executive Order

FLIP: Faculty-led International Programs/Programming

HBCU: Historically Black Colleges and Universities

HSI: Hispanic-Serving Institution

IDEAS: Increase & Diversify Education Abroad for U.S. Students (ECA program)

IP: Implementing Partner

MELI: Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation Unit (ECA)

MSI: Minority Serving Institution

PD: Public Diplomacy

PWI: Primarily White Institution

RFI: Request for Information

RFP: Request for Proposal

TCU: Tribal Colleges and Universities

DEFINITIONS

Agency Equity Team (AET): AET's objective is to identify how we can advance racial equity and support for underserved communities through U.S. foreign policy and assistance, public engagements and exchanges, grants, procurement, contracts, and consular services (Hutchins, 2022).

Alumni: Prior program participants in ECA-sponsored exchange programs.

Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AAPISIs): The AAPI community is one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. Projections indicate that by 2050 this population will double in size. As a result, the education of AAPIs will be critical in achieving U.S. educational goals (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2015).

Equity: The consistent and systemic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): Includes 91 four-year and 17 two-year institutions of higher education established prior to 1964 for the primary purpose of educating African Americans. The majority of HBCUs are located in the Southeastern states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands. HBCUs comprise three percent of America's institutions of higher education, yet they enroll 16 percent of all African American students in higher education and award 24 percent of all baccalaureate degrees earned by African Americans nationwide (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2015).

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): HSIs are accredited, post-secondary, higher educational institutions with at least 25 percent total full-time enrollment of Hispanic undergraduate students. HSIs include four-year and two-year public and private educational institutions. HSIs enroll 40 percent of all Hispanic American students of higher education. There are 274 institutions of higher education defined as HSIs using the criteria defined by the White House Initiative and the Department of Education (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2015).

Implementing Partner: An institution that has been contracted by ECA to administer and implement an exchange program, including pre-program recruitment, orientation, in-country support, housing, and post-program activities (as relevant).

Low-Income: An individual whose family income is at or below 150 percent of the poverty line.

Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs): Institutions of higher education that serve minority populations. They are unique both in their missions and in their day-to-day operations. Some of these colleges and universities are located in remote regions of the country, whereas others serve urban neighborhoods. Some are only a few decades old, others have been striving for more than a century to give their constituents the social and educational skills needed to overcome racial

discrimination and limited economic opportunities (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2015).

Mobile Exchange: Another phrase to describe in-person exchanges.

Non-Participant: In this assessment, the phrase non-participant is used to describe focus group participants who did not apply to or participate in an ECA exchange program.

Partner Institutions: Institutions that promote and/or administer ECA exchange programs through an international studies office or study abroad program.

Potential Partner Institutions: Institutions that do not currently promote and/or administer ECA exchange programs through an international studies office or study abroad program.

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs): The first TCU was created on a remote reservation community on the Navajo Nation. They now exist throughout Native Country. The 35 public and private higher educational institutions provide a response to the higher education needs of Native Americans, and generally serve geographically isolated populations that have no other means of accessing education beyond the high school level. TCUs have become increasingly important to educational opportunity for Native American students, an importance they have achieved in a relatively brief period of time (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2015).

Underrepresented Identities (also known as Underserved): Populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life, as exemplified by the list in the preceding definition of “equity” (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On January 21, President Biden issued Executive Order (E.O.) 13985, mandating all federal agencies ensure their missions advance racial equity and support for underserved communities. Each federal agency launched an Agency Equity Team (AET) to produce a variety of the deliverables, including progress reports, assessments, and an action plan to advance E.O. 13985. The Department of State's Bureau of Educational & Cultural Affairs (ECA) is included in the AET for R family (public diplomacy [PD]) Bureaus and Offices.

ECA continues to follow the tenets of their Bureau Diversity Statement to ensure American participants in their international exchange programs reflect the full diversity of U.S. society and that a culture of inclusion is incorporated in all ECA exchange programming. Despite this commitment, the perception remains that the numbers for minority participation in some ECA programs are disproportionately low, and reasons for these trends or perceptions are not fully understood.

The Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation Unit (MELI) at ECA examines outcomes and impacts of the PD programs sponsored by ECA and was charged with implementing an Assessment of Equity in ECA Exchange Programs. The Assessment seeks to better understand minority participation in ECA programs and barriers to greater participation in order to create an Action Plan to develop recommendations that are relevant and feasible.

To that end, The District Communications Group (DCG) research team reviewed literature with a focus on educational and exchange programs, conducted 71 in-depth interviews with various stakeholder groups in international exchange and held six focus groups with non-participants in ECA exchange programs. These discussions provided insight into the participation of underrepresented groups in ECA exchanges and best practices for adjustments across the exchange program cycle.

Beginning with an internal reframing of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) to a framework of cultural competence will help set the stage for tactical implementation strategies to more effectively operationalize the overarching aspirations of DEIA. This shift to a cultural competence mindset has the potential to offset the current paradigm of "helping" underserved participants (marked by an "assimilation" mindset) and transform it into a paradigm of cultural awareness and appreciation that is authentically inclusive.

Several examples of best practices that are already being implemented by ECA program teams were identified to assist in further dissemination of these practices so that program teams may identify their own strengths and areas for improvement and focus their efforts accordingly though there will always be room for improvement in the DEIA space. While human resource and financial constraints will remain pertinent issues for ECA and exchange programming in general, this assessment revealed several areas for improvement that do not entail increased expenditures, namely: 1) Institutional introspection and precise definition of the stated and implied goals of exchange programs (e.g., resilience-building) through the lens of cultural competence for underserved participants; 2) Incremental adjustments to the various stages of the exchange program lifecycle (pre-program, during program, and post-program) to increase the cultural competence of all participants, not only those from underrepresented backgrounds; 3) Leveraging existing structures and processes to track and monitor progress towards Bureau DEIA goals.

INTRODUCTION

On January 21, President Biden issued Executive Order (E.O.) 13985, mandating all federal agencies ensure their missions advance racial equity and support for underserved communities. Each federal agency launched an Agency Equity Team to produce a variety of the deliverables, including progress reports, assessments, and an action plan to advance E.O. 13985.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken named Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley as the department's first chief diversity and inclusion officer as he explained, "Diversity makes us stronger, smarter, and more creative." ECA's work is guided by the following diversity statement: *The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the United States Department of State strives to embed diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in all aspects of its work. Public diplomacy is most effective when people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives participate in people-to-people exchanges and programs to promote mutual understanding. The Bureau incorporates DEIA best practices throughout its exchanges and programs, grants, community partnerships, and in its workforce and workplace. ECA is committed to addressing barriers based on race, ethnicity, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, religion, geographic location, education, income, socio-economic status, and other diversity dimensions, that may hinder inclusion in the organization. The Bureau's commitment to DEIA strengthens U.S. foreign policy and is vital to building trust and partnerships here at home and around the world.*

Examples of ECA's efforts to build a culture of inclusion in all its exchange programming include:

- Conducting targeted outreach and recruitment to economically disadvantaged Americans.
- Coordinating closely with academic institutions, professional associations, organizations, and media outlets serving diverse constituencies.
- Enlisting the services of faculty and administrators from more than 350 Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs).

The overarching objective of this comprehensive literature review and exploratory fieldwork, commissioned by ECA and carried out independently by DCG, is to help guide ECA towards more equitable exchange programs through understanding:

1. How to increase the participation of racial and other minorities from underrepresented groups in the United States in ECA educational and exchange programs.
2. How to increase the number of minority-focused communities and institutions that are underrepresented as U.S.-based hosts to foreign visitors in those same educational and exchange programs.

The Assessment was underpinned by a review of the published literature on educational and exchange programming to both inform the primary research instruments and provide background and context through better understanding of:

1. Broader trends of minority participation in international exchange programs.
2. Facilitators and barriers to participation of underrepresented groups.

3. Retention, experience, and alumni engagement of diverse and underrepresented participants.

This document is grounded in the literature and intended to provide best practices and lessons learned from exploratory fieldwork with experts across the field of international exchange as well as former and potential exchange program participants. It embraces the breadth and diversity of intersectional identities as being inseparable from individual experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This Assessment entailed a comprehensive literature review of both grey and peer-reviewed source material, and primary research that included in-depth interviews with a variety of stakeholders as well as focus groups with non-participants in ECA exchange programs to understand potential barriers and facilitators to operationalizing equity goals into all stages of the exchange program cycle.

COMPREHENSIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

DCG completed a comprehensive literature review with a focus on educational and exchange programs. The goal of the literature review was to gain insight into the broader trends in minority participation and documented barriers to greater participation in exchange programming.

Various benchmarking tools were identified during the literature review via case studies that iterated on the Inclusive Excellence Guidelines set by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The researchers designed individual tools and instruments to determine the equity of study abroad programs for specific underrepresented identity groups of interest such as Black/African American students and students with disabilities (Sweeney, 2013; Johnstone & Edwards, 2020).

These benchmarking case studies served as a model to help inform the primary research conducted for this assessment by providing guidance on the types of questions that can yield information on the equity of institution-based exchange programs. Other case studies highlighted best practices that emerged from the literature such as collecting identity-specific qualitative data from study abroad students (Schmidt, 2010), which also informed the development of this assessment's primary data collection instruments.

Searches emphasized literature from the last 10 years, however, seminal literature from earlier years was included.

Below are the search terms utilized to conduct the literature review:

- Exchange program diversity
- Exchange program diversity and inclusion
- Government exchange program diversity
- Government exchange program diversity and inclusion
- Cultural exchange programs diversity

- Study abroad diversity
- Study abroad diversity and inclusion
- Barriers to study abroad participation
- Barriers to cultural exchange program participation
- Equity in study abroad recruitment
- Equitable educational exchange programming
- Diversity and equity in data collection
- Barriers to inclusivity in study abroad implementation
- Best practices in promoting equity and diversity study abroad/cultural exchange
- Discrimination in study abroad
- Racism in study abroad
- Sexism in study abroad
- Study abroad accessibility
- Black/African American study abroad
- Asian American study abroad
- Latino/Latina study abroad
- Discrimination in study abroad host communities in the United States
- Short term academic/professional exchange discrimination

Gaps in the Literature

To the researcher team's knowledge, some of the gaps in the literature included:

- Unobserved identities such as rurality, sexuality, religiosity, etc.
- Short-term and professional exchange programs
- The American host family perspective on equity in exchange

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

From February through June 2022, DCG carried out 71 in-depth interviews with participants from the following cohorts:

- ECA members of the Agency Equity Team
- ECA Program Teams
- Implementing Partners
- Partner Institutions (e.g., Universities that promote or administer ECA exchange programs)
- Potential Partner Institutions (e.g., Universities and colleges that run their own study abroad/exchange programs but do not promote or administer ECA programs)
- Host Families from underrepresented minority groups
- ECA Alumni from underrepresented minority groups

The research team received contact information for interviewees in the Agency Equity Team, ECA Program Teams, Implementing Partners, Partner Institutions, and underrepresented ECA Alumni from the ECA Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation (MELI) Unit. Some

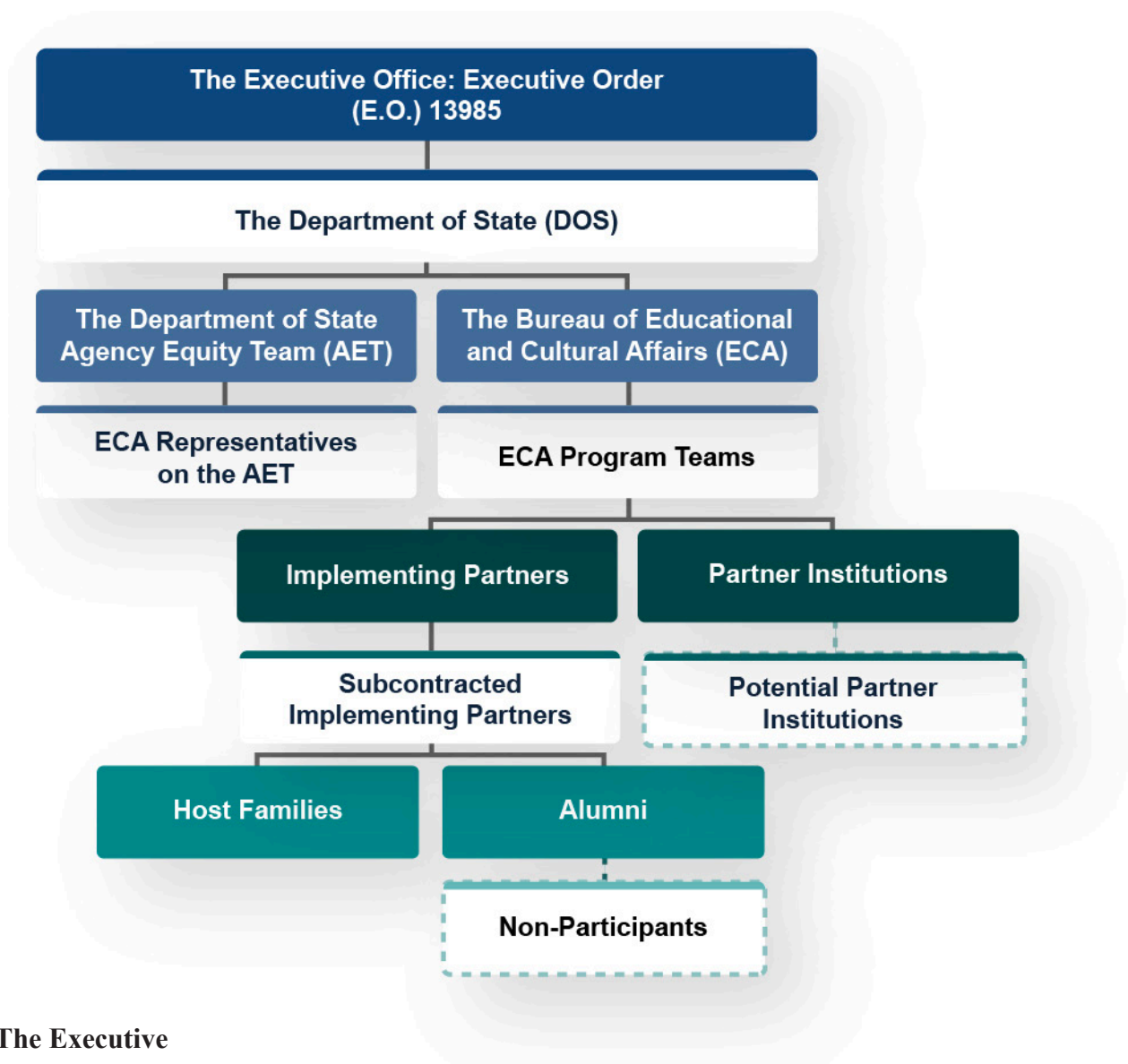
ECA program teams provided more or less information about the underrepresented identities of the alumni contacts. Thus, the full depth of alumni identities reported relies on the identities that participants reported.

The researchers externally recruited underrepresented host family interviewees through a research recruitment agency, specifically screening for underrepresented individuals who had hosted an exchange participant since 2015.

The virtual interviews were conducted in English via Zoom and lasted roughly one hour. Alumni and host family interviewees were offered a cash incentive for participation in this assessment. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, and later transcribed for qualitative analysis. The goals of the interviews were to better understand:

1. How different American audiences access and experience equity related to ECA programs.
2. The informal or formal diversity, equity, and inclusion objectives and policies of ECA exchange programs. (Pre-, during, and post-program activities such as recruitment targets, outreach, eligibility/selection criteria, operational protocols or resources to ensure comfort during program participation, post-program grants, etc.)
3. The experiences of minority participants/alumni of ECA programs related to all stages of exchange programming (e.g., awareness, application, enrollment, during the exchange, and post-program engagement).
4. Experiences and perspectives of representatives from partner and non-partner institutions with international exchange programs (including Minority Serving Institutions, or MSIs) and Implementing Partners related to DEI philosophy and approach.

Appendix I contains a demographic breakdown of interviewees. The discussion guides for these interviews can be found in Appendix III.



The Executive

- President Biden issued Executive Order 13985 in January 2021
- E.O. 13985 mandated all federal agencies to ensure their missions advance racial equity and support for underserved communities

The Department of State Agency Equity Team

- The Agency Equity Team produces a variety of deliverables including progress reports, assessments, and an action plan to advance the DEIA goals from E.O. 13985
- ECA representatives on the AET primarily look at DEIA in external engagements, foreign affairs, and foreign policy programming and work in the Bureau
- # of Interviewees: 2

ECA Program Teams

- Program Officers facilitate communications with program staff to stay informed about DEIA-related challenges and facilitators “on-the-ground”
- They also stay up to date on program-specific strategies for DEIA operationalization

such as:

- Marketing and recruitment
- Application processes
- In-country and post-program support and engagement
- # of Interviewees: 5

Implementing Partners

- Implementing Partners learn about ECA's DEIA objectives through the solicitation structure and the RFPs
- IPs may also have a DEIA team internally with objectives and priorities separate from the Department's
- IPs are sometimes non-profit organizations, but they may also be Primarily White Institutions (PWIs), MSIs, or Community Colleges
- # of Interviewees: 16 (associated with 6 institutions)

Partner Institutions

- Partner Institutions conduct outreach and marketing efforts to spread the word about ECA exchanges, fellowships, and scholarships
- They are not contracted by ECA, but they interact with DEIA in international exchange more broadly through their own institutional goals and objectives
- # of Interviewees: 10 (associated with 10 institutions)

Potential Partner Institutions

- Partner Institutions are not contracted by ECA, and do not currently market ECA exchange programs and scholarships
- They interact with DEIA in international exchange more broadly through their own institutional goals and objectives
- # of Interviewees: 4 (associated with 4 institutions)

Host Families

- Host families are screened and selected by either implementing partners or sub-contracted implementing partners
- They undergo varying degrees of orientations that touch on cultural competence and supporting international students
- # of Interviewees: 8

Alumni

- Alumni are engaged post-program in different ways depending on the ECA program they took part in
- They may be from any number of minority identity groups
- Many ECA programs have Alumni Ambassador programs or engage alumni in marketing and outreach by sharing their stories with future applicants
- # of Interviewees: 27

FOCUS GROUPS

In addition to the in-depth interviews, DCG carried out six focus groups with individuals who had not participated in study abroad or international exchange programs (“non-participants”). These focus groups were built around several underrepresented identities in ECA programs including: Black/African American, first generation to travel abroad, community college students studying on Pell grants, LGBTQ+, Deaf students for whom American Sign Language (ASL) is a first language, and Muslim Americans.

The focus groups were conducted in English and ASL (for the Deaf students) via Zoom and lasted roughly 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the participants’ consent and later transcribed for qualitative analysis. The researchers worked with an American Sign Language (ASL) facilitator to conduct the focus group with Deaf students directly in their first language (not through an interpreter). Participants for all the focus groups except for the group for Deaf students were recruited externally using a set of screeners that can be found in Appendix II.

The goal of the focus groups was to better understand:

- The motivations, priorities, and barriers related to international travel for participants in each underrepresented identity group.
- How communication about international exchanges may or may not have reached participants from different underrepresented identity groups in different ways.
- Barriers and facilitators to applying for ECA programs.
- Resources or support services that could facilitate participation of underrepresented minority participants.

Please refer separately to Appendix I for a demographic breakdown of focus group participants.

LIMITATIONS

- The researchers encountered a low responsivity rate in conducting outreach with ECA alumni. Even with a cash incentive for participating in the research, 43 percent of contacted alumni were unresponsive.
- Another challenge the researchers faced was attaining contact information for underrepresented host families. The researchers inquired with all the implementing partners, partner, and potential partner institutions, but none of the institutions were able to provide host family contact information.
- The researchers rectified this challenge by engaging a professional research recruitment firm to engage host family “parents” who had hosted an international exchange student in the United States since 2015.
- To facilitate the focus group with Deaf individuals, the researchers first attempted to engage an ASL facilitator through translation and interpretation firms. These firms only offered interpretation from spoken English to ASL rather than direct ASL facilitation from a written discussion guide.
- The researchers overcame this challenge by identifying an ASL educator who facilitated the focus group after receiving training from the Research Director.

EXCHANGE PROGRAM LIFECYCLE



THE PRE-PROGRAM STAGE

Structural Considerations	Socio-Cultural Considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Funding Caps• Financial Aid Calendars• Special Needs• Financial and Opportunity Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Model Minority and Respectability Politics” Concerns• Familial and Community Support• Impostor Syndrome• Justifying Participation• Fear of the Unknown

ECA applicants may face diverse barriers to participation in exchange programs. Financial barriers include congressionally mandated caps on program awards, hidden program fees, and program payment calendars. For applicants with disabilities, program applications may not accurately capture accommodations-related financial needs. For applicants who work to support themselves, a lack of paid time off can be a barrier to participating in exchange programs. Structural barriers include a lack of standardized academic accreditation from international exchange programs as well as limitations of less-resourced home institutions. Reducing the logistical barriers applicants may face in the application process is key to clearly communicating the available avenues that underrepresented exchange participants can access to participate in ECA programming.

PRE-PROGRAM: STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Effect of Congressionally Mandated Funding Caps

Financial barriers are the primary obstacle that can prevent underrepresented communities from participating in exchange programs. While scholarships may make exchange programs more accessible, ECA program scholarships are limited due to legislatively mandated funding caps. As these funding caps do not account for inflation over time, the real value of scholarships continues to decrease over time. For example, the Gilman scholarship program has a \$5,000 cap, which was set in the early 2000s.

Providing realistic expectations about the costs associated with participation in an ECA exchange involves crafting outreach that helps non-participants understand all the costs associated with participation, from required legal travel documents to the ECA scholarship timelines in which funds are disbursed.

We cannot [change the congressionally mandated funding caps for our programs], and we try to be very conscious of that in our outreach... study abroad is a small part of a much larger higher education picture... and it's just not realistic to tell a student sometimes [that] 'Study abroad is the best choice for you.' (ECA Internal)

Financial Aid and Program Payment Calendars

Applicants from underrepresented communities may not have access to financial aid or payment plans to help fund exchange experiences. Even for applicants who do receive financial aid, they may be required to transfer a certain percentage of their aid packages for the purposes of paying for the international exchange. This creates barriers for applicants with limited funds for their school programs, particularly if they will not receive credits that advance them towards completion of their degree requirements from their participation in an ECA program.

Community colleges and HBCUs... They're not like Princeton and the Ivy Leagues that have a lot of money, [students at these MSIs] may need more financial support. But if we have a policy that inhibits us from financially supporting them, it's not helpful... To [access] our scholarships, we have a policy that universities need to transfer at least 75 percent of [students' financial aid packages to help fund their participation in] our program. (Potential Partner)

ECA exchange participants who receive financial aid may not always get access to funds at the time when exchange program payments are due. Additionally, there are often different timelines between a participant's American and host-country institution, which necessitates further logistical planning by participants for whom financial aid is a requisite for pursuing higher education. For minority participants from MSIs or Community Colleges, there may not be available staff at the participant's institution who could clarify payment calendar discrepancies.

Participants with Disabilities or Special Needs

Having a one-size-fits-all financial need equation when programs calculate the necessary funds required for participation does not always include the extra costs that participants with disabilities have for support services or accommodations. As application processes typically do not gather information about accommodation needs, financially supporting participants with physical disabilities often involves surprise costs for unanticipated accommodations (e.g., ASL interpreter, special flight or residence accommodations, wheelchair accessibility, etc.).

If you wanted to [strive to be more inclusive], you also have to have the flexibility in your budget to add 30 percent to the cost [proactively] to say, "Okay, well, this person is going to need a special flight, and is going to need special attendance at this." (Implementing Partner)

If you're going to try and include [participants with disabilities] who need an extra interpreter, or who need [another type of accommodation] ... In the original budget, it has to be encouraged that in the sole source solicitation, that the budget [needs] to include a line for disability services. (Implementing Partner)

Financial and Opportunity Costs

The length of exchange programs can present a barrier to participation. Applicants who work to support themselves may not be able to enroll in full semester or longer ECA programs unless they are able to take an extended leave of absence from their employers. Long-term study abroad participants may also face the possibility of losing their jobs or missing potential internship opportunities (Schulze, 2016). For these applicants, a two-week program may be more realistic but may not be covered by ECA scholarships that have program length requirements.

There are semester abroad programs and stuff that I've been interested in, but I work full time, so it's like I'm not going to give up my job to like go study abroad for a semester or two. That's a tough thing to think about. (First Generation to Travel Abroad Non-Participant)

ECA participants with families and commitments in the United States may not have the bandwidth, finances, or ability to put life on hold for an exchange program.

I work with students who are working adults, and they can't leave their job. I've worked with students who have children, and they can't be gone for even a whole summer. I've worked with students whose families need them to be there over the summer to provide childcare for younger siblings. I've worked with students whose families need them to be home over the summer just earning money for the family. And so, those are students who

just cannot do the traditional [long-term study abroad program]. (Implementing Partner)

Academic accreditation is another concern for applicants, particularly if they are near the end of their academic degree program or if they have few remaining elective credits. Many international exchange programs may not translate to core credits that satisfy a participant's academic major requirements. This is also a concern for applicants with strict credit requirements to maintain financial aid or who may not have the financial resources to enroll in a "make-up" or summer semester.

What we find is that some students don't necessarily need the academic credit because they're getting ready to graduate, but they really want to study abroad. So, we always give it as an option as a CCE, continuing education. (Partner Institution)

To receive any scholarship or financial aid, students need to be earning credit. Right? Unless they have unrestricted electives, then the class that they take needs to be specific to their degree plan. The further they're along, so a junior or senior, the more difficult it becomes to find a program that aligns with their major, aligns with their degree, and offers a course or courses that they can take and transfer back and help matriculate them towards graduation. (Partner Institution)

Logistical Barriers

Underrepresented alumni and non-participants reported confusion about international travel requirements and documentation, which presented logistical barriers to studying abroad. Partner institutions echoed this and explained that the additional costs and complexities for obtaining these documents may discourage potentially interested applicants.

[To participate in an exchange there are] all these different documents to transfer all this [travel documentation] stuff over, which I've heard is a grueling process. And sometimes, people can be very demotivated from that, because looking at all of that stuff, I'm just like, 'Man, this is overwhelming, man, just to go overseas for a few months to study. This is crazy.' (Black/African American Non-Participant)

SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS IMPACTING PARTICIPATION

ECA exchange participants from underrepresented identity groups may enter exchange programs with a lifetime of experience with prejudice and/or discrimination. Their experiences are not homogenous, and their needs are as diverse as their identities. There is not a "one size fits all" approach to navigating the sociocultural factors that impact exchange participants' participation. By understanding the challenges that underrepresented communities face in getting support from their families, overcoming the perception that study abroad is not just for white, well-resourced students, and having access to resources that will prepare them to navigate their identities in a foreign country, there are several sociocultural factors that can be mitigated by adjusting tactics in marketing and outreach and during program orientation.

“Model Minority” and “Respectability Politics” Concerns

Underrepresented exchange participants may encounter discrimination in exchange programs that exacerbates the model minority conundrum in which some minorities may be considered “the exception” to racial or ethnic stereotypes. Understanding the experience of underrepresented communities in relation to ECA exchanges necessitates an intersectional framework that considers individuals as a full package of multiple identities and experiences that shape their decision to apply or participate in an exchange.

There are these preconceived notions of how Black Americans act or behave. And then, when someone acts or behaves outside of that, they get to be called ‘the exception.’ So, I know that the government would choose the people...and say something like, ‘Oh, we’re going to choose the best candidates who would [travel abroad] to change these perceptions.’ But even that has this negative connotation because what does that mean, and where are you coming from in that way? (Black/African American Non-Participant)

Fit with Other Exchange Participants and Within Host Culture

For underrepresented alumni interviewees, the experience of being a minority while participating in exchange programs was not something new, as they are aware of their minority status in the United States. Re-learning how to navigate identities in a foreign country in which cultural norms are different adds an extra layer of difficulty for underrepresented participants. In addition to the identity-related challenges that underrepresented ECA exchange participants may face in host countries, underrepresented participants may also face discrimination from others in their exchange program cohort. Conversations or workshops exploring identity-related challenges during pre-departure orientation can be beneficial for all program participants, not only for underrepresented groups. Including all participants will help alleviate the sense that discrimination is a problem to be solved by those with minority identities and allows all participants to increase their cultural competence at home in the United States, allowing them to be more culturally competent while abroad as well.

With our diverse students, we honestly need to do a better job of preparing them for the reactions that Americans and non-Americans will have to encountering a diverse American, particularly with racial diversity, because [experiences of discrimination happen when someone sees] you and out pops a phrase like, “Oh my gosh, you’re American? I didn’t know you could be American and look like you, or sound like you, or speak English like you.” (Potential Partner Institution)

One student mentioned the natural segregation of their group that happened on the trip, that all of a sudden, all the traditionally marginalized students were in a group together and all the white students were in a group together on the trip... the discrimination didn’t happen in-country, but within their own group that they traveled with. (Implementing Partner)

You grow up in the United States... [as a Muslim-American] you learned to hide certain aspects of identity...So I wouldn’t mention that I was fasting because it was just like, you’re hiding in a very weird way. (Muslim-American Community College Graduate, ECA Alumni)

Levels of Familial and Community Support

Underrepresented ECA alumni and non-participants expressed varying degrees of familial and community support. Financial and logistical barriers were reportedly the primary determinants for whether applicants may choose to participate in an exchange program. More than a dozen studies point to finances as a barrier for minority and low-income students (Wanger, Breslin, Griffiths, & Wu, 2020). For many non-participants, achieving international education was highly valued but financially out of reach.

I knew that I could handle any type of scholarship. I have a lot of faith in myself. I'm really disciplined... Everybody in my family is a professional. My mother reached only sixth grade education. My father, the same, but my mother has always been a true believer in education. And she used to tell us, "I have no money. I have no land. I have no jewelry. I have nothing, but everybody's going to go to school here." (Hispanic/Latino American, ECA Alumni)

For others, the value of exchange programs was not clear to participants' families or clashed with their socio-cultural beliefs about education and living in countries outside of the United States. For underrepresented alumni and non-participants from immigrant families in particular, the idea of leaving the United States to study internationally was something they reported was incomprehensible to their parents.

Going to school in the United States is more expensive, and in Europe, if you wanted to go to that school, it would be free. [From my immigrant parents' perspectives, they're] paying this much. The school [in the United States] is supposedly better. Why would [I] want to [study abroad]? (Muslim American Non-Participant)

I considered studying abroad briefly, but [my parents] had concerns about the expenses and whether I could manage living on my own in a different country for such a long period of time. And they also brought up the concerns about class credits... They basically just didn't think it would be very feasible for me. (Muslim American Non-Participant)

Some alumni's families were fearful that they might experience discrimination by participating in an exchange program.

Some members of my family were supportive, and some weren't... it was mostly related to just fear of me traveling to a foreign country alone...not knowing what kind of treatment I would receive. (Black/African American Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

Imposter Syndrome

Many of the alumni interviewees reflected on feeling a sense of impostor syndrome, defined as "the feeling that your achievements are not real or that you do not deserve praise or success." (The Cambridge Dictionary Online, 2022) This feeling was often attributed by participants as stemming from being the only person with their identity in their exchange cohort. Not being able to see themselves represented in their cohort, or in marketing materials or alumni ambassadors more generally, led many underrepresented alumni to feel like they either weren't good enough to be there or that they had to justify their participation to others that they met on their exchanges who may have been expecting someone who fit a particular mold.

I wasn't even going to apply because I thought I wouldn't get it, but I had someone push me to apply... that [application] was really nerve wracking for me. (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

Going abroad just in general... just kind of seemed like an overwhelming experience. And honestly it seemed like something very well-off students did. And most of the time those students didn't look like me. And so, it kind of felt like there's a little bit of imposter syndrome there. (Black/African American Pell Grant Recipient with a Disability, ECA Alumni)

[My host institution was] expecting a white person to come... it's always the thing that is chasing us minorities, that you have to work extra to demonstrate who you are and the way that you can deliver. And sometimes, that [puts a lot of extra weight on your shoulders]. (Hispanic/Latino American, ECA Alumni)

Instrumental Justification for Study Abroad

Underrepresented applicants and their parents might not see the value in studying abroad if it does not seem to benefit their education or career in the short-term. Institutional leadership may reinforce these viewpoints; they may not see the value of putting resources into study abroad if they view it as a roadblock that can prevent students from graduating on time.

Fear of the Unknown

Fear of the unknown minority experience abroad can make potential participants less eager to participate in exchange programs (Burrow, 2019). Finding community within their cohorts or their host communities was important to several alumni interviewees and can help shield applicants from fears about how they will be treated in the host country. Alumni interviewees also expressed fears related to spending time away from home institutions, communities, and support systems. While these are concerns common to many exchange program participants, they can feel insurmountable for those who may expect or fear discrimination either among their cohort or from local people during their in-country experience.

Justifications

If there isn't a clear path between going abroad and career outcomes, they don't see it as worth doing. Study abroad [can have] the perception amongst underrepresented groups as being something frivolous... doing something like an internship, that's clear cut... I can put this on my resume... that makes sense to a lot of groups. (Implementing Partner)

I was like [the majority of faculty and institutional leaders who are skeptical about study abroad and international exchange]. Why would you want to go study abroad and delay graduation? Well, [now that I work in this field, I know that] it doesn't delay graduation. (Partner Institution)

[It's important] that I gain something from [participating]. If I'm going overseas to do something, I want there to be a monetary benefit. Like, "Hey, you go do this for three months. We'll increase your pay." There has to be something I gain... I've given eight years to the country when I served [in the military], that was the free time I gave. (First Generation to Study Abroad Non-Participant)

[I would want to see] at least some kind of certification or something that I could put on my resume that would help me get to the next level in my career. Something that stands out versus "I just did this certification on Udemy last night." No, something that is really valuable. (First Generation to Study Abroad Non-Participant)

DIVERSIFYING MARKETING AND OUTREACH TO UNDERREPRESENTED PROSPECTIVE EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS

The key to successful outreach is to craft messages that resonate with target underrepresented audiences. Underrepresented applicants may assume that study abroad opportunities are not accessible to them or made for them. Conducting outreach with these underrepresented groups and their family members as early as possible, emphasizing the financial affordability of programs, and fostering conversations between applicants and alumni who share similar identities are all effective ways to leverage inclusivity and equity in marketing and outreach.

Key Findings

- Messaging needs to resonate with underrepresented potential participants.
- Peer-to-peer interactions between people who share the same identity hold power.
- Vulnerable and candid marketing helps inform decisions to participate.

Communications Channels

Partner organizations identified the following communication avenues as the main sources through which potential participants may learn about exchange opportunities: campus presentations, advertisement in minority mentorship programs, word of mouth, and social media. By enhancing inclusivity in marketing materials, underrepresented applicants may be more likely to apply.

We are working in a capacity building grant right now to South Africa... specifically focused on minority male students. We made sure that we targeted those students through minority mentoring programs [and] through classroom presentations. (Partner Institution)

Marketing approaches that rely heavily on word of mouth at college or community events may not be accessible for potential participants with physical disabilities. Providing marketing materials to communicate information verbally and visually about programs makes that marketing more accessible.

We should have work events where people are set up with tables and we can approach them directly to get information in ASL. (Deaf Student Non-Participant)

Deaf people are visual, we need visual things like posting ASL videos online instead of long complicated posts in English. (Deaf Student Non-Participant)

Messaging That Speaks to the Priorities of Potential Participants

It is important to ensure that marketing not only reaches underrepresented applicants, but that it resonates with them. Meaningful engagement with institutions may help ECA tailor outreach and communications to better resonate with underrepresented potential participants.

The goal of outreach is for underrepresented participants to come across the message and think “this program is for me.” Focus group participants shared that few students on their campus were aware of the opportunity to study abroad, because no one in their families or social circles had traveled abroad, let alone studied abroad. Outreach to prospective participants as early as possible in their academic or professional careers may lead to more participation so that they can plan and understand the steps needed to participate in an exchange.

[Our program] can get undergraduates... the earlier you can get people in, the more likely they're not going to self-select out of programs later... When people don't see people like themselves taking part in these things, they opt out – they self-select out. They don't think they're going to be good enough to qualify. (ECA Internal)

Nobody's really talked to me about that. Nobody's really promoted it... it was just really an opportunity that I took advantage of that probably a mentor could have given to me much, much, much earlier in my career. (Latinx ECA Alumni)

If they are alumni from any of the ECA programs, I make sure they help me with classroom visitations. I make sure that they help, especially their local kids to go back to their high schools and talk to their high schools, whatever office or a class is willing to bring them in. (Implementing Partner)

They would have to plant the seed earlier, in freshman year [of] high school, because a lot of people find out about this stuff after they're already starting college. And by that time, you haven't been exposed to it... [It should be], by the time you get to college, you're like, “All right. I'm going to travel abroad because we've been hearing about it since [high] school.” (Black /African American Non-Participant)

To help a program appeal to diverse audiences, it is important to present the exchange program in a way that is accessible to them – and to consider their priorities and barriers in advertising and outreach.

I [explained my experience with the ECA program] in a way that appeased the communities I grew up in, so many of us from those [underrepresented] backgrounds want to travel, but don't know the opportunity. I just said, it's a summer where you learn a language for free. (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

[Prioritizing the needs and wants of underrepresented individuals in marketing and outreach] will only make the program stronger, and it'll only attract more students who are underrepresented or historically excluded to apply and know that [participating in an exchange program] isn't so out of reach. (First Generation Latino Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

The Power of Hearing from Peers of the Same Identity

Non-participants would reportedly be more comfortable with the idea of studying abroad if they could interact with a program alumnus who shares an identity and understands their experiences. Research conducted on this topic concluded that outreach should feel personal and feature alumni and staff members from minority groups (Scott, 2017). This approach helps potential applicants feel like study abroad opportunities are open to them. Likewise, for non-participants, learning about opportunities from their peers or from people who have similar life experiences would make the information more credible.

...students will be more likely to trust someone who looks like them and someone who understands their experiences...growing up poor, Black, and a first-generation student and going to an elite white school, I knew about the pitfalls, the stereotypes, the microaggressions, and faced imposter syndrome all the time. I think letting them hear about my story...will allow them to see that you can get to where you want to go because they have people who have done it before. (Partner Institution)

I don't want these people to feel like they're being tokenized, but my students want to hear from [disabled] Fulbrighters. And so, I bring my own [disabled program] alumni back [to do outreach]. (Partner Institution)

Alumni will come in and talk to them about their experiences...we do talk about critical incidents. They talk about things that have happened to students in the past. And 'what would you do? What would you do in that situation'? (Implementing Partner)

We routinely engage with diverse alumni to serve as speakers as part of the information sessions. And then we also target those individuals to make sure that we're producing Q and As or profile articles so that when we are sharing examples of the program's impact on people's careers or impact on their communities, that people are seeing diverse group of program alums. (Implementing Partner)

By opening space for current underrepresented participants and alums to be more transparent about their experiences abroad on dedicated blogs or in marketing efforts, including the challenges they face, potential participants can make more informed decisions about international exchange program participation.

I'm very transparent about my experience...especially when I'm speaking to underrepresented students...I feel like a lot of study abroad and scholarships step away from that, ...they need to really embrace it to be as fully transparent and honest as they say they are being, because students deserve that. (First Generation Latino Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

I feel like all the times that someone has done an exchange program, they've always shared their experience... Not just selling it, but if [people] had questions, you could ask them because they actually went. And I honestly feel like it's always a little bit more trustworthy ... peer to peer, it's like, it always feels a little bit more like you can trust their opinion of it, because they are just like you in a way. (First Generation to Travel Abroad Non-Participant)

Emphasizing Funding Opportunities and Affordability of Programs

Applicants may assume that study abroad or international exchange is not financially feasible. As such, more transparently listing the full anticipated costs of a program in marketing materials, including optional excursions, or required document or process fees, may mitigate fears about financial uncertainties. Communicating about the ways that institutions are mapping exchange opportunities to home institution academic coursework and credit requirements would greatly enhance the attractiveness of exchange programs for potential applicants. Research has found that marketing and outreach efforts for students need to focus on funding opportunities, financial aid, student discounts, and other resources available to them while they have “student status” (Kasravi, 2009).

I think financially, one of the things that I worked [towards] at my former institution was the need to integrate it into academic coursework so that it could get covered by Pell, cost of attendance financial aid. I think that's a really strong strategy to use for students who wouldn't ordinarily maybe have the funding to do it. (Partner Institution)

Imposter syndrome is very real with a lot of our students...who are first gen and under-represented. They may hear about these programs but they may not think 1) they can get in or, 2) [they may think] that the cost is going to be prohibitive or, 3) that it is even something that's going to be worthwhile to them. So [we] just try to not only get the word out, but make sure the students know that they're going to be supported throughout the process and when they do get to the program. (Partner Institution)

I use the word “fully funded,” but I don't even know if that translates well into [my students' first language] ... I think a lot about what words I use in English and whether they'll be understood. But for anything, I mean, I try and really highlight that for all the programs that ECA offers that are [fully funded] ...I really try and promote that because those are the golden opportunities for our students. (Partner Institution)

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Key Findings

- Application processes may feel like a game, invasive, or full of insurmountable challenges.
- MSIs have varying and often limited capacity to provide application support and resources to students.
- Arbitrary selection criteria like GPA requirements can disproportionately and negatively impact underrepresented applicants.
- Applications should include built-in space for applicants who require special accommodations (e.g., for disabilities) to request them.

Complex and heavily involved application processes may make non-participants from minority groups feel that exchange programs are unattainable. When preparing applications, applicants at MSIs and Community Colleges may not have access to the same resources as their counterparts at Primarily White Institutions (PWI). Lengthy applications, GPA requirements, and application fees may deter non-participants from minority groups from considering applying. Application processes that do not consider the needs of non-native speakers of English or individuals with disabilities may also make participating in exchange programs feel inaccessible.

The Application Process May Feel Like a “Game”

Interviewees across cohorts agreed that application processes can feel like “a game,” or that they require knowing how to say the right thing based on prior guidance on “gaming” applications. Gilman alumni often went on to other programs and explained that having been through the application process once helped them understand its complexities and how to “write what the reviewers wanted to hear.”

I don't want to say it's like a game per se, but there is definitely a way to write application essays and I would be lying if I say that there is not a correct way to write application essays. And I think that is something that is kind of taught, whether it's through informal advice from one peer to another of people who've received scholarships and fellowships to younger students. (Asian American Immigrant and Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

The Application Process Can Feel Invasive

Some interviewees expressed that they felt unable to properly articulate their “worth” or the value that they would bring to the program. Rather than feeling encouraged to share the challenges they have overcome or faced in life, they felt like they needed to fit a mold or display their minority status or challenges in an exhibitionist way that felt off-putting.

I don't know how to write about myself to compel you all to want to fund me to go abroad. I just kind of feel ordinary, which I guess is, on one side of the spectrum, good, because you are [humble] but on the other side, it's kind of self-deprecating where you're just putting yourself down and not seeing the unique potential out of who you are and what you are and your experiences. (Black/African American Pell Grant Recipient with a Disability, ECA Alumni)

But there was this... tension between what do I reveal [about] myself...to make a convincing case that I am deserving of the scholarship... A lot of students of color and a lot of first-gen students struggle with that. (First Generation Latino Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

Underrepresented non-participants may feel pressured to share personal information about themselves to prove that they deserve a scholarship/study abroad opportunity.

I was like, 'I don't want to play the race card, I don't want to talk about this or that.' And my mentor was like, '...it's part of you and your story, and it's something that's worth talking about.' (Mixed Race Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

Perception of Exchange Programs as Unattainable

Non-participants may not view applying as worthwhile if they feel their chances of acceptance are low. They may be intimidated by applications requiring multiple essays or letters of recommendation and choose not to apply.

I could just imagine telling the people ... “Oh yeah, you should do this.” And they would see six small essays and throw their hands up and be like, “Not me.” (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

I’ve had some students, minority male students, who’ve gone through, fill out everything and then stopped when it said, you’ve got to submit a one-page essay and I’m like, ‘Come on, are you serious?’ (Partner Institution)

Further, perpetuating the mindset that rejected applicants should be grateful for all that they have purportedly gained or learned during the (unsuccessful) application process may perpetuate the impression that ECA programs are elitist.

Some of our programs at the semifinalist stage have interviews and have trainings and we try to provide people something, so even if they’re not selected, they’ve gained something from the experience. They’ve learned from the process. Maybe they apply again and get selected because they now know how [the application process and strategy] works. Maybe they just use that to apply for something else or use it in their academic and professional life. (ECA Internal)

Disparities Between Institutions

Underrepresented applicants from MSIs and Community Colleges may not have had the prior “training” or resources that applicants from PWIs have had in filling out complex applications. Breaking down the perception that application processes are games with a series of hoops to jump through entails building application processes with the least-resourced institutions in mind.

The application process can be time-consuming and necessitate maneuvering between various offices on campuses: financial aid, study abroad, academic advisors, writing support centers, etc. Underrepresented applicants may not have access to these resources on their campuses. From the perspective of institutions, well-resourced institutions typically have resources and staff to handle administrative tasks like grant application review, while smaller institutions may not have staff available to facilitate grant applications and proposals.

There are so many hoops. You need to have a sponsor person or institution... three or four recommendations... it was just...really a lot of barriers and obstacles in place. And it wasn’t really a straightforward process. (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

Before I moved here, I worked at [elite universities]. And those kids were ready to ace those applications, and write great essays, and they had writing centers that would help them edit those essays. The universities [here] don’t have writing centers. (Potential Partner Institution)

Once you drop the assumption that students have the time initiative and prior experience with these [study abroad application and enrollment processes] in order to independently navigate them, I think it becomes glaringly obvious that they're utterly non-intuitive and just sort of presuming that students will be running around securing scholarships on their own, getting their applications in, obtaining letters of recommendation, understanding how all this integrates into their financial aid, which frankly isn't nearly as much of a consideration for more affluent students who aren't balancing multiple sources of financial aid. (Partner Institution)

GPA Requirements

GPA requirements are an example selection criterion that may not provide an accurate measure of the skills or abilities that ECA seeks to measure in applicants and may also preclude programs from selecting participants who would, arguably, show the greatest gains from participation in the program. Program impact on academic performance may be more demonstrable in participants who have lower GPAs coming into an exchange program; for students with low GPAs before participating in an exchange program, studies have found their GPA to increase substantially more after participating in international exchange than it did for participants who had higher GPAs before participating in an exchange (Whatley & Raby, 2020; Stroud, 2010).

Studies show that when students have lower GPAs, if they study abroad the subsequent semester, they actually have a higher GPA. In my mind, students with lower GPAs are the ones that should be studying abroad at a higher rate. And so, rethinking our processes, why do we have a GPA requirement? Is it necessary? What other ways can we assess whether or not a student is ready to go abroad without using GPA? (Potential Partner Institution)

From the applicant perspective, a strict GPA requirement can give the impression that their worth comes down to one number rather than the application providing the selection committee with a holistic assessment of their abilities, skills, and other positive attributes, some of which may have been gained specifically through growing up as a minority in the United States (e.g., grit, determination, resourcefulness, etc.). GPA requirements may also inadvertently advantage students in programs historically seen as “less challenging” (e.g., Liberal Arts vs. Engineering), discouraging applications from students in STEM fields in particular (Kasravi, 2009).

With my school, it definitely seemed to be more aimed at... students that were overachievers in the sense. My school made it seem like they wanted to come off as, 'Oh, we want everybody here.' But then, they threw underneath 'We've got this GPA requirement at least a 3.4 to travel.' And... some people were just like, 'What the heck? I don't have no 3.4. That's hard for me.' So, I think they were definitely aiming for maybe the higher percentile grade point average in the class. (Black/African American Non-Participant)

If you're a first gen college student, it's very likely that having a competitive GPA...even if it's not the ultimate decision maker for whether or not you get the fellowship, it can serve as a deterrent, you just self-adjudicate that you're not qualified for this. (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

We work with [the student support services program] to get the word out to their students, tell them, 'Hey, there's some scholarships out there specifically for you folks that you guys could be eligible for.' And we tell them not worry about the GPA because there's no GPA requirement for these scholarships, which is nice. (Implementing Partner)

Language Barriers in Application Materials and Informational Sessions

If English as a second language (ESL) is not considered in the application process, outreach materials and events, it can create problems for both non-participants and selection committees. Non-participants might be deterred by the length and complexity of application requirements, as well as not having interpreters for informational sessions. Lower English language proficiency may also be a barrier to participating in a program entirely (e.g., visa or program interviews). Selection committees may not receive guidance on how to properly gauge the quality of non-native English speakers' application materials. This applies both to spoken languages (e.g., Spanish) and to ASL.

Additionally, translating application and other program materials from English into other languages may be challenging when there isn't a shared cultural context. It can create further confusion or misunderstanding over DEI and accessibility-related terminology that may not have a direct translation into the other language.

Language can be problematic, so when we go for translations, the English world is culturally different than others, so there are things like pronouns, or as we're talking about the queer community, those words do not exist in the same way in other languages. So, we can really fall into something dangerous just by a mistranslation by somebody who might not have the context. (Implementing Partner)

Accommodations for Potential Applicants with Disabilities in the Application Process

Allowing applicants with disabilities to clearly describe accommodations they need in the application process, as well as having staff at the IP level available to answer their questions about existing accommodations, may be effective ways to mitigate the concerns of participants with disabilities.

EQUITABLY BUILDING PRE-PROGRAM ORIENTATIONS AND ONBOARDING

Key Findings

- Safety-related fears vary between underrepresented identities.
- Allaying family members' fears may positively impact an applicant's decision to participate.
- Providing identity-specific international travel resources helps underrepresented participants feel more supported.
- Cultural competency workshops may reduce inter-cohort discrimination.
- Building relationships between underrepresented participants and affinity groups in the destination country adds another layer of support.

Underrepresented participants may have concerns about their safety during study abroad, particularly if they are new to international travel in general. Safety concerns can also vary depending on each minority group, as well as the host country. Pre-program orientation and resources can mitigate these concerns. Speaking with someone of a similar background during the orientation phase (either program staff or program alumni) as well as offering resources and workshops on how to navigate life abroad as a member of a particular minority group can support participants as they prepare to embark on their exchange.

Safety Concerns Related to Fear of the Unknown

Fear of the unknown and feeling unprepared can magnify safety concerns about life abroad. Add to that trepidation about how minorities or those with visible disabilities may be treated and safety concerns can become overwhelming. While safety briefings are common in exchange programs, it is important to consider that safety concerns can vary for each minority group.

These are things that students do need to weigh if it's worth the risk for them...even though it's an amazing experience and I advocate for it, maybe psychologically, like safety...that's a priority for people. It looks different for everyone... (First Generation Latino Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

Being a Black woman is a challenge in Morocco. It's constant harassment, cat calling... We [program participants] didn't talk about how we felt...until a week before the program ended... some of the girls are scared to walk [alone]... the guys were like, 'Oh, gosh, I didn't know... I'll walk with you next time.' I'm like, we should have had this conversation after the first week. (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

Family Concerns

Study abroad and international travel in general can be much less familiar to disadvantaged potential participants who have not had the same opportunities or family legacy of travel abroad as more affluent students. Non-participants mentioned that they are influenced by family concerns. Families of underrepresented students who haven't traveled abroad before may have safety or health concerns about study abroad programs (Schulze, 2016; Anthony, 2020).

[In reference to young Latina populations], "I've had some students say, 'Yeah, I want to go.' But my mom and dad say, 'Why would you go to that country?' or 'Is it really safe to travel?'" (Partner Institution)

[Telling your family,] 'I want to go abroad,' can be disconcerting for some families... [this leads to questions like], 'Is it safe? Where are you going? How are you going to be supported? What happens if you get sick?' (Implementing Partner)

For some families it's not enough to say, 'I'm going.' You have to give them more information, so it would've been nice to have some support...and just even talk about general safety. I don't think [my family] understood. (First Generation Latino Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

Increasing the number of touchpoints and communication channels that parents of participants have access to may help mitigate concerns. Partner organizations shared that actively engaging students to bring their family to orientation sessions, or even having presentations that inform parents about a program's curriculum and safety precautions may also mitigate some of these fears.

When [potential participants are] going to a recruitment event, bringing mom or dad along, or their brother or sister, or their aunt and uncle, or their grandma, whoever it is who really did support them, or who may have been a naysayer in the beginning, and upon return, saw the alum really shine to say, "Yeah, I was hesitant, but I'm so proud now." (ECA Internal)

So invite your mom, your dad, your significant other... and let them hear everything that we go through with you in terms of risk management... how to prepare... I always say, invite families with you to pre-departure meeting. (Partner Institution)

We spend a lot of time educating the parents that "Don't worry, mom, father... they'll be safe." (Potential Partner Institution)

Identity-Related Safety Concerns

Underrepresented non-participants felt unsafe traveling to certain countries where they may face discrimination for one of their identities. Providing participants with cultural competency training during orientation sessions may mitigate the impact of these experiences by helping them prepare for what to expect in their destination country and maximizing the chances that others in their cohort will recognize discriminatory treatment and support the underrepresented participant.

Any unfriendly LGBTQ country I would have a really hard time going to. Like I'd love to go to Russia. I love the history. I'd love to see some of the buildings. I don't feel, as a gay person, comfortable going to Russia. (Gay Male Non-Participant)

As a Muslim woman, I'm also sometimes nervous about safety. I feel like it takes a long time to feel comfortable in a certain space, and thinking about traveling to another country, and you hear things about how Muslims are perceived in those countries, but you never know until you're there what the experience is going to be. (Muslim American Non-Participant)

Cultural norms for participants and families from underrepresented groups can also be in opposition to stated goals of a study abroad program (e.g., developing independence or self-reliance). Reframing the way that benefits of exchanges are explained can make the program more appealing to underrepresented participants without compromising the quality of the program's goals.

[In the culture of the underrepresented identity at this institution,] the idea of going alone somewhere isn't as desirable. The value of independence isn't as big of a value in [this community's] context, as I feel like it was at my predominantly white institution or within my predominantly white community growing up, where becoming independent was something to strive for, and to work towards, and that was very desirable. And [this community's] culture is much more communal, much more family-oriented, much less indi-

vidualistic than what we see within that predominantly white culture in the United States. (Potential Partner Institution)

Cultural Competency Workshops

Pre-departure workshops should include sensitivity training for participants to better understand the nuances of navigating their underrepresented identity in the host country. Many underrepresented participants reported that they did not receive identity-related guidance or resources related to navigating challenges in the host country, resulting in situations they felt uniquely underprepared to handle effectively.

There wasn't much talk about diversity during that time... you kind of had to figure it out... Definitely the minority... aspect is not something that was thought [through] that much when I was there. (LGBTQ+ Asian American, ECA Alumni)

Holding cultural competency workshops may also help prepare others in their cohort to be aware of the experiences their minority cohort members may face and be supportive however possible. Alumni frequently reported experiencing discrimination from their peers in an exchange cohort more often than they did from people in the host country. In other cases, participants felt their cohort peers would have been supportive but may not have fully understood what they were experiencing and did not “see” it as it was not directed towards them.

While encouraging participants to be supportive of one another is not the mandate of the exchange programs, relationship building between American participants can have powerful ripple effects once participants are back home and can increase the cultural competence of the majority participants significantly. Cultural awareness workshops during program orientation can prepare participants for challenges that they may encounter in the host countries, both logistical and identity related.

What is a must is that cultural background orientation. One in the United States and one in [host country]. (Filipino American, ECA Alumni)

But once we got in country, we had a session for gay rights, what marriage looks like there, traditional values there, what it means to be Black in Spain and Black in the EU, as well as for the Latinx community. (Black/African American Low-Income, ECA Alumni)

[The program] should be more intentional in terms of [helping underrepresented participants] acknowledge the fact that you are different and that you may be at the beginning treated differently... I had to overcome, in every country that I went, the fact that I was not white. (Latino American, ECA Alumni)

Peer-to-Peer Connections

Sponsoring affinity groups and mentoring relationships with underrepresented alumni, and inviting new participants to join those groups, may mitigate fears around possible discrimination while providing participants with an opportunity to learn strategies for handling sensitive identity-related situations during their exchange experience.

When staffing pre-departure orientations, it may be important to include alumni from under-represented identities aligning with the makeup of the cohort to ensure that any questions about mitigating or dealing with identity-specific concerns can be addressed (Burrow, 2019). Many alumni reported that they benefitted from interacting with program alumni when they were in the pre-departure phase of their study abroad program. These interactions allowed them to discuss questions or concerns related to navigating life in their host country as a minority.

The more you talk to [alumni in the pre-program phase], the better - particularly those who are maybe more like you racially... (First Generation Hispanic/Latinx American, ECA Alumni)

If [program teams] can have [underrepresented alumni] offer their story and share [their experience] – and other students see it, it has proven to be very beneficial [in helping that student see the opportunity as something they can also achieve]. (Implementing Partner)

[Engaging alumni with applicants] is critical in everything that we do. They are just really helpful with everything and they've been in a student's shoes before, so they're able to say, "Oh, are you in such and such a course? I remember when I took that and you're going to go abroad, you're going to see this is how it relates to that." They really make a great impact on what we do. (Partner Institution)

Other Considerations for Pre-Departure Orientation

Underrepresented participants may not be familiar with the logistical preparations required to travel abroad. Timely post-acceptance orientation sessions can teach participants about visa/passport procedures, insurance requirements, and additional financial aid options. While these are topics that may be useful to a broad swath of exchange participants, those from underrepresented groups may be less likely to know how to navigate these potential barriers or may need more time to secure financial aid or special accommodations. Program teams and implementing partners should be cognizant of not taking for granted a base level of knowledge or availability of resources that exchange participants from underrepresented groups can access and, instead, proactively offer the information and resources to help guide them to a successful exchange experience.

(Study abroad courses are) really needed especially for our local kids like when any of them don't have passports... Basically, providing them with the vocabulary that they need in order to be successful overseas... before they go abroad, they take... a pre-departure orientation class. So one credit course... We have them do current events, little news stories find out what's happening in their host country. (Implementing Partner)

[Participants] feel like they're being invited to the table, but they're not given a seat because they have different needs. – (Implementing Partner)

FACTORS IMPACTING UNDERREPRESENTED EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS WHILE ABROAD

Obstacles While Abroad

- Being perceived as “not American” based on appearance
- Needing to hide or obscure identities for safety
- Discrimination or segregation within cohorts
- Limited contextual support

Mitigating Obstacles

- Building true resilience, and not endurance, through contextual support systems
- Prioritizing what resources, orientation topics, preparation, and in-country support participants know they have access to
- Having defined lines of contact for in-country mental health and logistical supports

OBSTACLES THAT EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS FACE ABROAD

Underrepresented participants face numerous challenges abroad while trying to navigate their identities in a foreign country. For example, alumni often reported having to justify their identity as Americans to foreigners after not fitting a stereotypical racial and cultural mold. While these stereotypes and other questions about an underrepresented participant’s identities may not come from a place of malicious intent, having to justify their identities took a toll on participants’ mental health. Some alumni even had to mask or guard their underrepresented identities abroad for fear of discrimination. Building cultural competency in the staff that support underrepresented participants, and among the non-minority participants in a program cohort, may build the capacity of staff and cohort members to better support underrepresented participants in mitigating these challenges.

Perceptions of Who “Looks” American

Individuals that participants meet abroad may not perceive them as being “American” because of an underrepresented identity they might hold. The impact of perceptions like these on alumni was that they felt dehumanized. Feeling the need to justify their identity as Americans and as an underrepresented individual could be an isolating experience. One research study found that without program support, underrepresented students often navigate challenging conversations related to identity on their own (Anthony, 2020). While ECA is unable to change the broader issue of the image that America exports abroad through mass media and other channels, preparing exchange participants for this situation and, ideally, having alumni from underrepresented groups speak at orientation sessions (pre-recorded if necessary) about these kinds of issues and how participants can mentally prepare for them can help mitigate the damage. Again, as interviewees mentioned also receiving this treatment from members of their American cohort, including these testimonials and mitigation strategies in the orientation for all participants would be beneficial.

They have this idea and perception of what Americans should look and act like, and if you don’t match that it just... It opens up a lot of questions that you’re going to be asked. (Mixed Race Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

Everyone hoarded around the people who looked traditionally more American...sometimes people would think that I’m not American. (Filipino American, ECA Alumni)

I was always seen as...not really American while I was overseas or seen as less than, or dehumanized or reduced, overly simplified. (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

White Americans can travel a lot of places and not really be perceived as an oddity...But, we as Black people, if we go somewhere that's not primarily Black or primarily with people with darker skin, then we will be perceived as outsiders more than the average white Western tourist is. (Black/African American Non-Participant)

Need to Hide or Obscure One's Identity

Both exchange program cohort members and host community members may question participants from minority groups about their identities. A study of Asian American students found that respondents perceived a denial of their American identity by their hosts abroad, often due to ignorance rather than malice (Đoàn, 2002). While it can initially be an alienating experience for participants, such questions often stem from genuine curiosity and can lead to deeper cross-cultural dialogue.

[Being asked to explain one of my identities] was generally not malicious intent. A lot of curiosity around where I'm from, especially, but also it was mutual. So it was definitely like this mutual sharing, which was really nice and part of what I had expected and hoped for. (First Generation LGBTQ+ Native American, ECA Alumni)

Although, some of them were...quite aware of the real aspect of tribal life, but the majority of them, it was more of stereotype idea...overall the students, I think had this perception of Americans...I mean, I wasn't an American, I was a Native American, which was different. (Native American, ECA Alumni)

I was feeling tired of being the person who felt responsible in explaining why things are...I felt like I had a lot of responsibility...because I was the only person of color. (Filipino American, ECA Alumni)

Having to Hide Identity Traits Due to Safety Concerns

Underrepresented participants may not feel physically, emotionally, or psychologically safe when participating in exchange programs. They may feel that they have to hide aspects of their identities in order to feel physically safe in the host country. For example, according to Fulbright Prism, LGBTQ+ individuals in the Fulbright program often do not speak openly about their identities, fearing discrimination in their host countries (Chew, 2021).

We were closeted in [host country], both with the local community and with the expat community. We just thought that was safest. There were some really homophobic activities going on in the neighboring country. (LGBTQ+, ECA Alumni)

Especially if you have these two identities as a queer person and as a Muslim, then sometimes it is kind of between choosing which side of me do I want to choose to be safe if I'm traveling? Am I going to make this part of myself known because I'm traveling to this country and then hide the other part? (Muslim American Non-Participant)

An investigation of study abroad participation found that underrepresented students in particular express concerns about general safety in the study abroad environment (Whatley & Raby, 2020). Some alumni interviewees purposely shaped their exchange experience around their underrepresented identities based on emotional safety concerns they had about traveling abroad.

I think I was definitely more cautious about my sexuality...the identities that I identify with really [determined] where I chose to study abroad. I was very intentional with how comfortable I wanted to be. And I wanted to live my identity. (LGBTQ+ Asian American, ECA Alumni)

Underrepresented participants who normally hide aspects of their identity in the United States may exhibit the same behaviors on exchange programs to feel psychologically safe within their cohort group.

You grow up in the United States... [as Muslim] you learned to hide certain aspects of identity...So I wouldn't mention that I was fasting because it was just like, you're hiding in a very weird way. (Middle Eastern Community College Graduate, ECA Alumni)

The racism that you may experience coming up as a Black American, you would quickly find out that it's not native to America... You would quickly find out that you're still a Black person, no matter what country you go to. The racism is still similar to coming up in America. So... that aspect like, "Oh, damn! I've got to remember I'm still Black, I'm still African American, so I still have to maneuver in a way, as I will, even if I was in America..." (Black/African American Non-Participant)

Discrimination and Segregation within Exchange Cohorts

As touched upon, underrepresented participants may experience discrimination from within their exchange program cohort and sometimes identify this as a larger issue than in-country discrimination from the host population. A Boston College study found that a significant amount of racism that Black students experienced during study abroad was perpetuated by their white peers in their cohort (Bolumole & Barone, 2020). Discussing diversity and building cultural competency within an exchange cohort may mitigate these experiences.

One student mentioned the natural segregation of their group that happened on the trip, that all of a sudden, all the traditionally marginalized students were in a group together and all the white students were in a group together on the trip... the discrimination didn't happen in country, but within their own group that they traveled with. (Implementing Partner)

[Even in my cohort,] we had people that weren't ready to accept diversity. (Latinx, ECA Alumni)

I didn't see people calling out behavior [from other exchange participants in my cohort] that would be racist. (Middle Eastern Community College Graduate, ECA Alumni)

We had this one dude in our orientation group who was pretty anti-Semitic...I brought it up with our orientation person ... I guess he got the equivalent of a stern talking to, be-

cause obviously he was still in the program. And so me and [another cohort member], we were...like, 'Yeah, this is still making me very uncomfortable.' (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

Ensuring that program staff undergo training that includes case studies or role play is one tactic to prepare for potential participant experiences of discrimination. A University of Minnesota study found that other approaches to mitigate experiences of discrimination include selecting culturally sensitive program staff, as well as training on-site support staff with strategies to address potential discrimination (Đoàn, 2002).

With our diverse students, we honestly need to do a better job of preparing them for the reactions that Americans and non-Americans will have to encountering a diverse American, particularly with racial diversity, because it's usually someone sees you and out pops a phrase like, "Oh my gosh, you're American? I didn't know you could be American and look like you, or sound like you, or speak English like you." (Potential Partner Institution)

In general for a lot of our students, when they do go on an external program, they find themselves as the only Black person on the program. They have challenges, I guess, being in that space and feeling like a bit of an outsider [on top of being in a foreign country]. (Partner Institution)

SUPPORTING UNDERREPRESENTED EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS

As mentioned previously, the ways in which exchange programs define the goals of the program itself (e.g., build resilience, encourage independence, etc.) often go unexamined. Through discussions with ECA and institutions involved in administering exchange programs, it became clear that there is a perceived dichotomy between the idea of providing support and encouraging participants to build resilience and independence. However, what we see in the literature on resilience in minority and underserved communities (Marks, Woolverton, & García Coll, 2020; Meyer, 2015) as well as from the current assessment is that providing support to participants to mitigate the deleterious effects of discrimination while on an exchange goes hand-in-hand with building their resilience. Just as a spring that is perpetually compressed will lose its ability to bounce back, humans who experience unrelenting pressure will lose their resilience.

A more nuanced and introspective look at the stated and implied goals of exchange programs side-by-side with a close look at the “safety net” (financial, psychological, etc.) that exchange participants bring into the program will help program teams and partners be cognizant of the differing needs of underrepresented participants. Not only will underrepresented exchange participants potentially be disproportionately affected by discrimination abroad, but they may also have fewer resources (historical and current) at their disposal to help support them through these experiences.

Intentionally designing contextual support systems with these considerations in mind can help mitigate the disparities in the lived experiences and benefits gained by a diverse swath of exchange participants. Support systems could include services such as in-country mental health support, in-country (or remote American) liaisons who are trained in cultural competency and can

help troubleshoot concerns around discrimination, and a strong focus on the pre-program preparatory process as outlined above.

Providing these support services will not only benefit individual exchange participants, but also has the potential to increase overall participation by minority and underserved community members as evidenced in a University of North Carolina study. Researchers found that a lack of program support once abroad could contribute to the smaller number of students of color participating in study abroad programs (Anthony, 2020).

This institutional introspection should also include a discerning look at what experiences are considered “out of a participant’s comfort zone” (constructive) vs. those that are more destructive in nature and potentially identity-specific, particularly in the absence of contextual support. Studies show the nature of high discrimination stress can be a double-edged sword (both building and tearing down resilience), with contextual support often being the determining factor (Romero, Edwards, Fryberg, & Orduña, 2014; Fonseca Freitas, et al., 2017).

I also don't believe that [in] study abroad it is our job to make everybody entirely comfortable. I actually believe that study abroad and international experiences should make you a little uncomfortable, not in an unsafe way, but this is often what builds that resilience. (ECA)

Direct Line of Contact for Sociocultural and Mental Health Concerns

Alumni interviewees consistently reported that having someone (a therapist, program team support staff, etc.) to talk with who shared their identities may have helped them avoid feelings of loneliness, isolation, or even potentially to avoid mental health challenges they faced.

Our advice generally when somebody reaches out to us with a problem that they're having, we say, "You should get in touch with your university's counseling department and work with them on the issue." Then we have something called ASPE... Through ASPE, you can get in touch with a mental health counselor, including in your language. (ECA Internal)

There was a student who came on program with a mental health condition, and her mental health deteriorated, and she did have to be hospitalized, and the lag time in informing [the ECA program team] was problematic. They knew that, they understood that, and acknowledged it when the issue did finally make its way to us that, "Hey, we know that we're late in updating you on this." I don't think it was the approach that was the issue. It was really the timing of informing us. When any student is hospitalized, we want to know. (ECA Internal)

I definitely needed therapy while I was there. Mainly because I didn't feel like our resident director was particularly effectual. (Filipino American, ECA Alumni)

Some participants reported feeling like they had no in-country support to relay concerns and needs to, particularly for experiences of discrimination and mental health concerns. One way for ECA to amplify support may be to set up a mental health system that all exchange participants are required to enroll in during the pre-departure phase.

There's really no in country support for folks...whether that is having a director on site that looked like me, or creating an environment where students felt like they could escalate those concerns in a safe and authentic way. (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

If there was one fundamental resource that... could be a been made available... it would be counseling in case somebody falls on hard time. Because I had no idea what my resources were...So that is the one fundamental like, "Hey, kids, if you ever have trouble and you're ever struggling mentally, or you just really need someone to talk to, we have this person for you." (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

Additionally, better understanding the neurodiversity of the participants who are currently interested and participating in exchanges may allow ECA to target mental health priorities in a systematic way. Some non-partner organizations reported conducting mental health evaluations for participants prior to their acceptance into a study abroad opportunity.

Having on-site services for mental health support that focus on things like managing medications and providing immediate mental health crisis support may more equitably address these challenges. Taking the approach of providing these supports for all exchange participants rather than retroactively sending support to participants who need it may mitigate the impact of crises before they occur.

We have also offered Telehealth to the students for free. Just log on your app and talk to them and so I always tell students if you're going through something and you're not really sure what it is, you're not physically ill, but you just feel like 'I'm not connecting' or 'My mental health is in shambles,' or, 'Things are not going well,' then to use those resources or if you're just not sure what to do, then you can start with us. (Partner Institution)

Students...in the study abroad programs [represent a] much higher percentage of neurodiversity than they do in a general population of that college...one of the things that I'm seeing as you begin the conversation with a student is their desire to run away from their problems. And as many of us, when we feel overwhelmed, want to take a vacation, want to quit our job and just go to a remote island or hide in a closet, that's even more intense for somebody who is dealing with neuro diverse challenges. (Partner Institution)

[Semester-long exchanges involve] a population of students that have high [mental health needs]. Even the most high-functioning, academically oriented students have a lot of needs in those areas. [Exchange program coordinators] made sure that they had somebody on site. There was a counselor for every location, and that's not something that you really worry about for short-term things, but I think managing medications and stuff like that has become more prominent. (Partner Institution)

Direct Line of Contact for Logistical Concerns

Having a designated contact with the bandwidth to support underrepresented participants, somebody who they are in regular contact with or have access to as needed, may help underrepresented participants feel even more supported throughout their time abroad.

I did have [an in-country] point of contact, but they felt a little removed. We met them in orientation, and then I never saw them again... I didn't feel like I had a relationship... established with this person, [and I did not feel comfortable] talking about what was going on. (First Generation Latino Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

I think enabling students an avenue to share what the challenges they were facing and have that truly be heard and listened to...once students got on campus, it was hard for them to really get the needs that they had met. (African Refugee and Community College Graduate / Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

The program [staff were] somewhat detached... They knew sort of from a higher level what happened, but these sorts of incidences... there wasn't really a contact. (Asian American, ECA Alumni)

I talked to some previous [participants] before maybe the application process found someone on LinkedIn and said, "How did you like the school? The program?"... Across the board, it's always, "The [program] [support] in country...will not help you." Once you get reimbursed for your flight to go over, you won't hear from them and that felt to be pretty true to my experience as well. I never got updates or any sort of advice [to solve the concerns I had]. (First Generation LGBTQ+ Native American, ECA Alumni)

Developing a Culture of Support

Having a space or culture within a program that allows underrepresented participants to express their needs or concerns with exchange program coordinators may help them feel supported. Setting an expectation that all participants have the same opportunity to express themselves and engage in program activities will help all participants feel that they have ownership over their experience.

There may be louder voices than others...that absolutely can cause harm to another participant, in terms of what they feel comfortable putting out there if they're different... the way that our program is structured is that everybody has [multiple] chances to make themselves heard, be via their creative work, or their human perspective on their writing / culture. So, it's a challenge in that people relate differently, and people are different, but we have at least a baseline of making sure that everyone is heard in some way. (Implementing Partner)

[All of the other members of my cohort and I] were all talking about us being scared about racial stuff...it was still nice to know that someone else didn't feel like I was just complaining. (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

People just nodded their heads and were like, 'Yeah, we hear you. There was no 'calm down' or 'don't be aggressive' or, 'well it's a different country'...I felt very welcomed to speak about identity...that I was in a safe space and that they genuinely cared about my comfort and security. (Black/African American Low-Income, ECA Alumni)

If there was more conversation about students with disabilities going abroad, that would be very helpful so that we wouldn't feel like we can't ask questions regarding support,

if we want to take advantage of that opportunity... But as a person with a disability, I definitely felt like I didn't feel comfortable talking about it, but maybe if there had been an opportunity where somebody had created a space to talk about it, maybe I would've explored [available resources] more. (Black/African American Pell Grant Recipient with a Disability, ECA Alumni)

Affinity Support Groups

Many alumni interviewees expressed that they would have benefitted from having someone from a shared identity to talk to while abroad. Minority communities within the larger host-country community may be a resource for minority exchange program participants to help ease their transition into the host country.

She was on a civic engagement program and sort of had a closure in her identity at that program with support from people from all over the world in that. And while she was here learning just from different walks of life and seeing different communities and the support for the LGBTQIA communities was really motivational. (Implementing Partner)

An affinity group...being open to giving people opportunities to understand and meet with other people and hear about that experience in that country, I think would be really helpful... that's also a group that you can reach back out to while you're in country. (LGBTQ+, ECA Alumni)

ECA is limited by international cultural norms, standards, and practices. Some ECA interviewees referenced built-in mechanisms in their programs that connected underrepresented participants with others in-country who shared their identities. Building these types of connections into all programs can better support underrepresented participants.

For the past 5/10 years [we] have been putting on a special pre-departure orientation where we work with [participants] from the region and we have people from their countries and we also talk to them and we do it in split gender groups. We have women from the region talk to the women who will be going out and explaining to them that they may be subject to some Islamophobia. (ECA Internal)

Supporting Exchange Participants with Disabilities

There is a growing number of exchange participants studying abroad with disabilities. From 2013 until 2019 the number of US students studying abroad was between 300,000 and 350,000 each year, with each year demonstrating an increase of about 10,000 students with disabilities (Institute of International Education, 2021). Proactively integrating more support for participants with disabilities may lead to a more effective culture of accessibility for all participants.

International institutions hosting exchange participants may not always have the resources to provide accommodations for exchange participants with certain disabilities. Finding alternative solutions for these types of situations before they come up may enhance the equity within ECA exchange programs for participants with disabilities.

We have candidates who have visual impairments, have hearing impairments, have some

disability. We have, I think, done a really good job of going out of our way to work with universities to make sure that they have reasonable accommodations and to make sure that they will be able to be successful on program. (ECA Internal)

And interestingly, when I approached the host university and I said, “We have this student with documented disability from the doctor’s office and everything. And they have all the resources here at the university.” They’re like, “What is that?” The universities in Asia [didn’t] recognize that as a disability. (Implementing Partner)

ECA may consider developing a standard set of supports and check-ins with students with disabilities to ensure that they feel supported not only before, but also during their exchange experiences. Accessibility standards can vary greatly outside of the United States. As a result, host country communities may not be equipped to support participants with disabilities.

I became a Paraplegic when I was in high school from a football injury... I navigated all of that in the United States, back from the time I was 17 until ADA arrived... So, [accessibility challenges in the host country were] all familiar to me...I just didn’t expect things to be accessible...I learned, I’ll go up and down curbs in my wheelchair. I transfer easily, I just do that. (Participant with a Disability, ECA Alumni)

When [challenges] occurred, they would be embarrassed a little because sometimes they wouldn’t even necessarily understand...they would take me to a restroom and then, they’d look at the door themselves and they’d look at my chair and they’d go, ‘Oh.’ Because it never occurred to them that my chair needs 28 inches to get through, and a lot of old bathroom doors are skinny little things. (Participant with a Disability, ECA Alumni)

I went [abroad] and I studied there and I enjoyed it, it just didn’t really work out too well... I have additional disabilities and they didn’t think someone with my disabilities would be able to make it through school... I was actually upset because I thought I did really well in school just to find out that it was not even going to count for anything. (Non-Participant with multiple Disabilities)

Alumni interviewees with disabilities shared that established program accommodations may make them feel more limited than they perceive themselves to be. Trusting participants with disabilities to speak up but also having resources ready is a way to mitigate accessibility concerns in a respectful and proactive way. Allowing non-participants with disabilities to clearly describe the accommodations they need in the application process and having staff at the IP level available to answer their questions about existing accommodations they have access to, may be an effective way to mitigate the concerns of participants with disabilities.

I did get one accommodation and that was on my return flight... The initial itinerary was going to have maybe three stops coming back. And I think [the program] paid an extra \$250, and I only had to have two stops coming back. I’m so used to the disability that I’m good at asking for what I need. And I actually prefer not to be kind of smothered, or with people being unnecessarily concerned about my limitations. Because I’m less limited than people imagine. (Participant with a Disability, ECA Alumni)

[Even as a wheelchair user,] I do well with things that aren’t even accessible. Sometimes

I enjoy an opportunity if I see a set of two or three steps, and they're wide enough steps and I just pop up into a wheelie and go, we'll bounce down. And I enjoy watching people go, 'Wow.' Because it does, I think send a message that even people in their country, if they have role models for being a little more aggressive in terms of what they can do. (Participant with a Disability, ECA Alumni)

ENGAGING UNDERREPRESENTED EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS POST-PROGRAM

Engagement Directly After Returning to the United States

- Mitigating culture shock
- Having a backup plan for cancelled or delayed exchanges
- Strengthening re-entry workshops for resume and career building

Engaging Underrepresented Alumni

- Alumni generally want to be program ambassadors, but may not have the financial means to do so without compensation.
- Collaborate with institutional contacts to provide platforms for the impact stories of underrepresented participants on campuses and in marketing.

SUPPORTING UNDERREPRESENTED EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS IN RETURNING TO THE UNITED STATES

Underrepresented alumni interviewees reported that they struggled with readjusting to life in the United States after returning from their exchange programs. Those who were on exchanges that were cancelled early especially struggled, as they often did not have housing, employment, or health insurance upon returning to the United States. Returnee workshops with targeted discussions around underrepresented identities can help participants process their study abroad experience and mitigate culture shock. Additionally, in easing the transition, participants may benefit from career workshops on how to market their study abroad experience for employment, as well as networking opportunities with fellow alumni. While this type of support will inarguably benefit all alumni, just as with the effects on academic performance, we might expect a more demonstrable effect size on participants entering the program with a lower baseline of support in these areas.

Mitigating Difficulties Readjusting to Life After Study Abroad

Culture shock and difficulties with readjusting to the United States are common for all exchange participants. Participants from minority groups may need more support with processing their exchange experience upon return as they navigate the strangeness of potentially begin perceived as very different identities abroad and in the United States. Studies have shown that institutions that offer reentry support by conducting returnee workshops to allow past participants to interact

with each other, as well as study abroad and counseling professionals, are beneficial in mitigating these difficulties (Henry, 2014). Post-program engagement such as workshops, meetups, as well as formal and informal discussions with previous underrepresented alumni may mitigate culture shock.

I did not take part in this, but they do offer a workshop series for study away returnees... they usually have a faculty member who kind of hosts a discussion on some kind of theme or topic, whether it's, I think being POC abroad... or studying abroad in a specific subject... (Asian American Immigrant and Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

The reverse culture shock...I think that [programs] could benefit greatly from having a post experience programming opportunity that would allow students to unpack, digest everything that they just went through, but then also help ease with the transition of getting used to being back in the United States. (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

Backup Plans for Cancelled Exchanges

In the event that an exchange program is cancelled or cut short, participants from minority groups may not have a safety net in the United States if they had planned on being abroad for a particular amount of time (e.g. employment, housing, health insurance).

We've thought about how to better prepare students for when they go overseas. For example, we did a video series on how do you budget while you're overseas? Because again, these are financially underserved Americans who might not have mom and dad's credit card to fall back on. (ECA Internal)

We'd quit our jobs to come here and be here for a year... I was going back home to nowhere to live, and no health insurance... they weren't even going to give us the rest of our stipend... We had to petition for it. (Mixed Race Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

Coming back...was a whole pain because obviously it was a pandemic and I just didn't find a lot of support from [the program]. (Filipino American, ECA Alumni)

Extending Program Impact

In easing the transition, participants may benefit from career workshops on how to market their study abroad experience for employment, as well as networking opportunities with fellow alumni. Research from Georgia State University has emphasized that reentry workshops should be sources for personal, academic, and professional development (Henry, 2014). Post-program workshops that emphasize resume building and communicating about an exchange on LinkedIn both keep alumni engaged with a program and extend programmatic impact. These opportunities help participants build skills that they may not have had support building at their under-resourced Universities. Particularly for potential underrepresented participants who may not see study abroad as valuable for their careers, promoting these alumni resources in marketing and outreach can increase the appeal of exchange programs.

We've done workshops on thinking about your career. What does this international experience mean to your career? For one example, I attended a workshop we did at the

University of Kansas, where we did everything from, how do you present this study abroad experience on your LinkedIn profile to how do you conduct yourself at a conference? Things that these students don't know. How do you talk about study abroad in a job interview? How do you talk about it on your resume? So, really putting the push behind their experience. (ECA Internal)

I think they've definitely done a better job at...saying... 'You're a lifetime (alum). Here are the benefits that you would get, '...I felt like at my time...that wasn't really communicated...I didn't really know how to move forward or what that would look like. (First Generation Latino Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

Building sustainable online networks of alumni may enhance the visibility of underrepresented participants in exchange programs and could be leveraged in marketing to connect prospective participants with alumni that look like them.

We've done a number of initiatives connecting [exchange alumni], bringing them together as networks and cohorts around ideas, such as entrepreneurship, around climate change, around technology. And again, we launched a whole Gilman scholar online network that has over 5,000, I think it's 5,000, Gilman's registered where they can connect with each other because they might be in a study abroad program and never know that there are other Gilmans on there. (ECA Internal)

LEVERAGING THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDERREPRESENTED EXCHANGE ALUMNI

While ECA programs offer a variety of opportunities for alumni engagement, many alumni reported that they were not aware of the full range of opportunities that were available to them. Upon returning from exchanges, alumni often move on to new phases in their academic or professional careers, which limits their opportunities for post-program engagement. Alumni who are working full-time may not have the time or resources to be engaged in outreach. Conducting early outreach to inform participants about the opportunities for engagement as alumni, as well as offering incentives to participate in engagement, can lower barriers to alumni participation.

Structural Barriers to Post-Program Engagement

Participants from underrepresented backgrounds in particular may not return to home institutions after they have studied abroad (e.g. they may graduate, start working). As a result, they may not be able to participate in many aspects of post-program engagement.

Often students of a diverse background might be doing this as one of their last experiences at the university because they've had other things that they've had to do, and this is their last chance to do something. And so they're going straight from their experience to maybe graduation and work. And so they might not have the same opportunity to spread the word on campus so to speak. (Implementing Partner)

We don't really have return students, so that's always been a challenge for me in particular...So, there's not a lot of opportunities for post-trip engagement. (Implementing Partner)

Financial Barriers to Being an Alumni Ambassador

Participants from underrepresented backgrounds may be less likely to participate in alumni engagement programs or as an alumni ambassador without compensation.

A lot of us still have that socioeconomic background that we carry with us...perhaps they should consider compensating alumni ambassadors in some form...I have heard from other grantees that is primarily the reason why they did not apply is because they're not being compensated in some way for their time and for their labor. (Asian American Immigrant and Pell Grant Recipient, ECA Alumni)

Engaging Underrepresented Alumni

Underrepresented potential participants sometimes engage with program alumni who share their identity to learn about the program. Partners have observed that the perspective that potential underrepresented applicants gain from alumni may shape the culture around that program at any given university. Reflecting on their exchange experiences, alumni have reported that these interactions were helpful for them in the pre-program phase.

There is this kind of canary in the coal mine effect in that if a student may be one or two of, let's say the only non-white students in a given study abroad program, how they describe their experience afterward may have an effect for years to come upon how students who identify with that similar demographic choose or not choose not to enroll in either that program or study abroad in general. (Partner Institution)

[It wasn't] until I saw my friend, someone I knew who had come from a similar background as me, very low income as well, grew up in violence, seeing her go on to get this scholarship [helped me see that] 'If like someone like [them] who resembles me in some way can do it, I can as well.' (Black/African American, ECA Alumni)

MONITORING AND EVALUATION FOR DEIA

Key Findings

- Some partner organizations do not have processes and mechanisms to manage DEIA data collection.
- Others collect more DEIA-related data than RFPs require, but do not currently share it with ECA.
- IPs and Partner Institutions desire two-way communication with ECA about M&E best practices.
- Operationalizing DEIA necessitates concrete and measurable M&E indicators.
- Many MSIs utilize creative qualitative methodology or data collection tools to manage M&E to overcome low staff bandwidth.

DEIA DATA COLLECTION

ECA and some partner organizations reported that they did not have processes and mechanisms in place to manage DEIA data collection. Without clear instructions, IPs and partner institutions do not necessarily share their own data or their own DEIA efforts with ECA. Clearly communicating DEIA policy objectives with measurable indicators will allow program teams to more effectively initiate practices. Steps towards mitigating challenges include communicating priorities in Requests for Information (RFIs) as well as in Requests for Proposals (RFPs) and Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs) and using tools to streamline data collection.

Current Data Collection Practices

Operationalization of DEIA policies is hindered by a patchwork of practices around collecting demographic and other pertinent data. ECA and partner organizations consistently reported that DEIA data collection suffers due to the human resource limitations of having small teams managing an institution's exchange program outreach and recruitment. In the absence of clear instructions, IPs and partner institutions do not necessarily share their own data or their own DEIA efforts with ECA. They also cannot be proactive in any way that will incur costs without clear direction (RFP). IPs and partner institutions also report one-way communication with ECA and lament that their expertise and data are not being leveraged.

When we see specific requests for information from ECA or requests from ECA to look at specific indicators related to DEI or work with ECA on specific initiatives, like for example, the HBCU symposium that's happened for the last couple years or the new Hispanic Serving Institute, institutional leaders designation, all of that is towards the goal of ensuring that [program participants] really represent the full diversity of thought, of region, race, ethnicity, ability, and perspective that makes up the United States. (Implementing Partner)

We actually provide more details and data regarding DEI than is mandated [in the ECA RFP]. (Implementing Partner)

Data Disconnect Between IPs, Partner Institutions, and ECA

Some programs have a detailed breakdown of participant identities that are self-reported. Clearly communicating DEIA policy objectives with measurable, concrete indicators will allow program teams to operationalize DEIA practices more effectively.

We can't be all things to all people, but where can we effect the most change? That's a huge challenge. And again, I have a small team. I have finite resources. I have finite budgets. Staffing is always going to be a challenge for me because we also have to run programs and monitor students and think about things and DEI infuses everything that we do, but we also have an incredible amount of work to do so having that human resource challenge as a manager is always my biggest challenge. (ECA Internal)

Tools to Mitigate Challenges

Communicating priorities in RFIs and, ultimately, in RFPs and NOFOs and through other less formal communications with implementing partners may build a more united DEIA policy im-

plementation approach from ECA down to implementing partners.

People are already busy. If we stopped and we categorized everything we did by every underserved community, every marginalized group, that would be a hundred percent of our job and we still wouldn't achieve it. So how do you find a balance in understanding what we do and what we don't know, who we mean by underserved, how we prioritize that in each country, bilateral, multilateral relationship and how do we chart a course forward... (ECA Internal)

Some of the tools that IPs use to mitigate challenges like having limited staff to gather data include a qualitative data method called “six-word stories” that allows them to quickly collect a digestible amount of data from exchange alumni.

We have done things like when we were doing visioning as we started to make this transition to become a tribal university, we did some community-based community meetings and community visioning sessions and did things like six-word stories... It's six words. It's a manageable chunk of data. It's not like you have to transcribe multiple hours and hours of transcripts. As a qualitative researcher, I appreciate it, but it's labor intensive, right? We have to figure out ways to manage that. (Partner Institution)

ECA may consider connecting IPs with “Via Traveler Relationship Management” (Via TRM) to streamline the data collection and form intake processes during the recruitment cycle. Non-partner institutions reported monitoring and evaluation benefits they have seen in transitioning to Via TRM.

[We use the Via Traveler Relationship Management Portal or Via TRM to conduct] form gathering from our students so we're not sending them PDFs that they have to print out, and fill out, and send back to us scanned. And pre-departure preparation, lots of those things are now housed in Via... It's been very helpful because we are now better able to quantify the number of students that we are impacting and to have evidence of the work that we do with those students. The documents they turned in are all in one place, the communications that we've had with them are all in one place. For evidence, and reporting, and data gathering, it's been wonderful. (Potential Partner Institution)

Inclusive Excellence Scorecard (Sweeney, 2013)

- This tool is a modified version of the inclusive excellence model from Williams et al. (2005) that can be utilized to evaluate inclusivity throughout a program's components.
- The scorecard was adapted to evaluate access and equity for African American students in study abroad.
- There are four inclusive excellence areas, each with their own definitions and suggested indicators: Access and Equity, Campus Climate, Diversity in the Formal and Informal Curriculum, Learning and Development.

Practices Currently Being Utilized Across ECA Programs to Increase Equity

Currently, ECA program teams are levelling the playing field for under-resourced institutions during proposal season by adding points to the proposal scoring rubric for institutions that are MSIs. This counterbalances some of the inequities MSIs reportedly face in having less money to fund financial, legal, international, and outreach teams that may typically work on these types of proposals at more well-resourced institutions.

Capping the number of participants from any one university, including Primarily White Institutions, is another tactic being utilized to mitigate the underrepresentation of minority participants in ECA programs.

We do a series of workshops through [my program]] that we contract with U.S. colleges and universities to host. So, we release an RFP, they have to respond, et cetera... We published the rubric in that RFP, and we add a small amount of points for if you're a minority serving institution, a community college or from [state institutions that are] underrepresented. (ECA Internal)

[We set a cap of] 1 percent of the population could come from any one institution. But we do use a review panel. We are not making these decisions. We have external reviews made up of advisors and people from a variety of institutions. We ensure that our panelists comprise the diversity of institutions that exist as well. And we do emphasize within the criteria that we are looking for diversity. (ECA Internal)

If we see that community college students make up 50 percent of our applications for [program] and are only being selected at 20 percent, well, that's a problem. (ECA Internal)

Building on Best Practices in ECA Programs

One of the flagship programs that interviewees pointed toward as a success story for DEIA implementation is the Gilman Scholarship, noting that its core values should frame DEIA efforts related to program administration moving forward. Gilman applicants must be receiving a Federal Pell Grant during the time of their study abroad, and the program takes a two-pronged approach to equity by targeting underrepresented participants in exchange and by broadening the destinations where US students travel.

I targeted students who were first generation, who were underrepresented in study abroad, who were Pell eligible... They may hear about these programs but they may not think one, they can get in or two, that the cost is going to be prohibitive or three, that it is even something that's going to be worthwhile to them. So just try to not only get the word out, but make sure the students know that they're going to be supported throughout the process. (Partner Institution)

Building on the Gilman program by expanding access to the scholarship for two-week long faculty programs, reportedly the type of exchange most commonly sought out by underrepresented students at MSIs and community colleges, may attract more underrepresented applicants.

The Benjamin Gilman International Scholarship Program... is the department's absolute number one top example, at least for Americans, on how we achieve diversity, equity and inclusion. (ECA Internal)

It's really important for us to have as many feedback mechanisms as we can and then sharing that with our team so that we're aware of, hey, community colleges, a lot of programs do not offer two-week faculty-led study abroad programs that are accessible, we need to revise the Gilman Program terms and conditions so that it's more accessible and that there's no program limit. (ECA Internal)

When you think about Gilman populations, 50 percent of them are the first in their families to go to college. 60 percent come from rural areas or small towns in the United States... And also, 70 percent represent racial or ethnic minorities in the United States. So really thinking about the full program cycle is what we've done with Gilman. (ECA Internal)

CONCLUSION

While this report details many areas where diversity and inclusion efforts for exchange programs could be strengthened, it would not be feasible for ECA leadership or program teams to address each area in the near-term. Some program teams have already seen the benefits of practices outlined in the report, including facilitating alumni engagement with program participants, levelling the playing field for under-resourced institutions during proposal season, and capping the number of participants from any one university. It is recommended then that individual program teams examine their strengths as well as potential areas for improvement as outlined in this report and choose one area to focus on initially for short-term planning purposes and develop a concrete process and set of procedures that can then be applied to other areas in the longer term.

To begin, program teams can consider the three phases of exchange programming (pre-program, exchange itself, and post-program) and choose one area for improvement that resonates and seems most applicable to the program's constituency. For example, to address a known lack of peer-to-peer connections in the early stages of a program, teams can create affinity groups for new underrepresented participants. Based on the results of those first actions, further initiatives on issues identified in the report can follow across all phases of the exchange program life cycle.

As issues of discrimination or bias are not within the purview of underrepresented groups themselves to solve, many of the recommendations for adjustment in this report would be targeted to all program participants. This would encourage an "all hands on deck" approach to strengthening diversity and inclusion efforts. Nevertheless, much of the recommended support can disproportionately benefit people from disadvantaged backgrounds or others historically underrepresented in exchange programs, as many of these supports cannot be taken for granted as they may be for more privileged participants.

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